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Bearing Gifts

By

Lisa Walser

B.A., University of Montana, 1976

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements


for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts


University of Montana

1988


Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Examiners



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Bearing Gifts

A collection of stories

By Lisa Walser

Bearing Gifts

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Bearing Gifts

Bearing Gifts

The guy's name is Harry Foot. Now isn't that incredible, that his parents gave him that first name? I mean, didn't they put any thought into it at all? It's not even Harold Foot, his real name is Harry.

I look for this all the time, men and women with names that immediately put a mark on them, make them the brunt of jokes and innuendos: Peter Popitout, Cheri Pitts, Summer Harvest, I've worked with them. Some people overcome the stigma, even rise high above it, but most, like the ones I mentioned and this one I'm about to see again, this Harry Foot, were dragged down by the teasing and now are so meek and mild that you'd like to take a stick to them just so you could hear them cry out instead of always simpering and whispering, afraid to speak up, much less yell.

For, you see, I have borne my gifts in the darkest of nights and in the bright light of the day, in turbulent times, when men's armies stood poised to strike, and in the most peaceful of moments, when a woman slept with her child

with gold ribbon, each gift is lovingly presented. A gift of insight.

But I am being too medieval in my language. I forget that we are in the late, late years of the 20th century. All this dark talk will only frighten you and depress me. I prefer to think of myself as Santa, but far more intelligent, bringing gifts to enlighten human beings rather than temporarily hiding their unhappiness.

And so I look for the do-gooders, the happy, carefree people, and the ones who are in a state of forced humility. And it is in this last group that I find the ugly, the maimed, and the ones with funny names, like Harry Foot. These are the ones who have been deluded for so long that they unknowingly pray for me each night. "Please God, why have I been marked like this?" they ask. And my gift will answer them, will let them know that their unhappiness is not God's work, nor the Devil's, but because of the meanness of their fellow humans. What they do with the information is their business, but I do demand that my gift be acknowledged.

And so I am here for the fifth time with Harry Foot. This is my last chance with him, five times is my limit.

Harry's house is much as I remember, except that when I was here last it was summer and the pungent odor of tomato plants filled his yard. Now it is winter, and the walk is

shoveled and immaculately swept so that no one will slip. The snow is heaped uniformly on one side, sand and salt sprinkled liberally on the cement. As usual, the porch light is on, even though it is only mid-afternoon, reminding me of what I already know, that Harry has not come home yet. Also, as is the custom with his kind, I find the door has a variety of locks, bolts, and chains. I am amused for a moment and enter the house.

Inside it is tidy. A worn, short-napped carpet runs from wall to wall, a second-hand couch sits alone in the living room, and the curtains hang limply from the rods covering a view of the bleak, winter worn yard. On the walls are a few photos framed in cheap plastic: Grampa and Gramma Foot, stiff and starched; Harry, his development catalogued in a series of annual school pictures; and a photo of Mr. and Mrs. Foot, Harry's parents. They stare out at me with stern eyes, their faces forever encased in a look of irritation. They seem to be reminding me that this was their house, willed to their dearest Harry, and I shouldn't be messing with his life. "Too bad," I say aloud.

Next to them is a photo of Jean--Harry's one and only "girlfriend." She is in a nicer plastic frame that is painted gold and pressed with scrollwork. No wonder Mr. and Mrs. Foot look crabby, their frames are only woodgrained contact paper.

Jean Justin is the girl's name. The picture was taken when she was in the ninth grade and there is a coy smile on her lips. Today Jean is a shrewd, mean woman, but that wasn't true when she knew Harry--then she was a shrewd, mean girl.

It's almost unbelievable that even Harry, my dear, sweet, Harry Foot at 14, with his acned face, greasy black hair (no, it wasn't the style), a kid who was still waiting for that spurt of growth that would enable him to see over the heads of most of the girls in his class, would fall for Jean's trick. For, you see, it was a joke. One of those awful, cruel pranks that kids do to each other. The kind that when they're older, the protagonists of the joke will get together, and one will say, "Remember that trick we played on what's-his-name?" And someone else will answer, "Yeah, he sure fell for it." Then there'll be silence and somebody will say, "I wonder what ever happened to that guy?" and no one will know, because that guy, along with all those other kids who were picked on to death, end up like Harry.

Jean had been put up to it. She was a popular girl with her peers, a term meaning that a kid is a leader of the group by virtue of looks, money, or wit. Jean had gained her distinction through humor, albeit a rather unkind humor. She had learned that by criticizing half her classmates, the other half would find her funny. By imitating the kid with

the limp, or talking in falsetto to make fun of the society girls, or even reenacting the imagined labor pains of one of their unwed classmates, Jean was able to attract a group of loyal friends. Even those in her group who found her humor vicious remained, knowing that they would be a target if they left the safe, but cold, sanctuary of her friendship.

Early on in her junior high career, she had espied Harry and immediately began pantomiming him for the amusement of her group. When she learned his name, he became a regular character in her repertoire: on her knees to more match his height, face covered with ballpoint "pimples" (no prop was out of bounds, even if it was hard to wash off), and speaking in a whiny, nasal voice, she'd plead, "Why won't anyone go out with me? Is it because my feet are hairy?" After awhile there was only a kind of polite giggle in response, the kind you get when a joke's not funny or it's been heard before. Jean's group had been dwindling as the year wore on so when one admirer suggested that she go out on a date with Harry and tell them what it was like, she jumped on the idea, even embellished the plot.

The next Friday Jean Justin's mother drove her daughter and Harry to a miniature golf course. She would return in three hours to pick them up at a nearby hamburger dive.

The invitation from Jean had surprised the boy, but in his naivete and his parents' constant reassurances that he was a fine looking son and some nice girl would realize it

someday, the offer from Jean seemed to be the beginning of his teenage life that he had been waiting for, perhaps the transformation he had hoped and prayed for.

Harry won the golf game easily, for whatever else you may think of Harry, he was well coordinated and enjoyed sports, even being a member of the track team in his school. Jean, who hated to lose at anything, was angry but kept this to herself in the knowledge of his humiliation to come. In fact, she assumed the persona of one of her society girl characters. Harry, never having spent any time with a female, other than with his mother, was unsuspecting.

After the game they read the names of people who had made holes-in-one, and the boy, getting nervous now that the diversion of the game was over, started commenting on the many and varied colors of the balls used in miniature golf. Even he knew the conversation was dumb but was unable to stop himself. When Jean suggested a walk in the woods behind the establishment he readily agreed, glad to stop his own inane rambling.

In his inexperience he did not know that this undeveloped lot was the local "lover's lane" in their town. She, though no regular, since few boys could stand her caustic demeanor long, had lost her virginity in this field and had mapped it out well in planning for this night.

"What are we doing here?" he asked, sounding very much like Jean's imitation of him. He had begun to hear noises

behind trees and bushes, catching sight of bits of clothing, a leg here, an arm there. Now Harry knew where they were, you could take a 14-year-old kid who'd been raised in a cage and he'd know, or have an inkling, of what was going on here. He just had to voice his uncertainty by asking.

In answer to his question, Jean took his hand, shuddering to herself and realizing that, yes, it was sweaty, just as she had expected, and led him to the appointed place. He followed like a dumb animal, not sure if he was being taken to slaughter or to greener pastures, but going with a ridiculous innocence of heart that could only expect the best.

I can tell that by now you're feeling sorry for Harry. You're expecting him to get caught with his pants down, literally, and that's what would have happened if I hadn't intervened. It was the first of my interventions with Harry, and it, like the other times, has failed. So far.

What I gave to Harry as he went like a sleepwalker into Jean's trap was my gift of insight. In one nice clear picture I let him see his tormentors hiding in the bushes, flash cameras ready. He saw all the planning and laughter that had gone into this night. He felt the disgust Jean felt when she held his hand. All this I infused in him in a moment, but with a clarity of understanding that few people ever achieve.

And my dear, sweet, stupid Harry, having gained this power for an instant for the first time in his life, never acknowledged my gift.

"I, I've got to go," he stammered, slipping his wet, cootie-covered hand away from hers.

"Why, what's the matter?"

"I've just got to go," and he ran, first the laughter of his classmates and then the sighing of the lovers reaching him as he raced back through the woods the way Jean had taken him.

The sap never told Jean or her friends that he knew the whole sham. No, he just continued on in his bumbling way, pretending not to hear the mocking comments: "Have a nice time with Jean, Harry?" "Afraid of a little ass, Harry?" "Did you get cold feet, Harry Foot?" And he just looked at them with the same smiling, dumb face as before, and treated them with as much solicitude as ever.

Jean gave Harry one of her class pictures, the 5x7 variety, inscribed: "For a night I'll always remember, Love, Jean." Harry took it solemnly, thanked her, and this is the same goddam picture I'm looking at now.

I hear the locks turning, clicking, and unbolting, and Harry Foot enters his house, removing his hat, scarf, coat and galoshes in a plodding and logical manner, putting each item in its place before proceeding on to the next. His

clothes are gray, either in color or aspect, and he finally raises his head so I can get a good look at him.

He is 30 years older than when I first interposed with Jean: the greasy black hair of his youth is still slick but gray, the body is heavier, no more 40 yard wind sprints for him, and he looks shorter. But dammit, his eyes still hold that open, "Shazaam!" type wonder he had when he was a kid, that face still announces, "Welcome, I'm a sucker," and as I watch him he says aloud, "Oh, it's good to be home."

No, he cannot see me, but he turns on the heat, puts on a sweater, and looks around the house as if he expects to find someone. And why shouldn't he begin to recognize my presence? I have been with him four other times. He should begin to realize something, for Christ's sake. Four times I have visited him, given him insight into the true ways of mankind, and each time he has failed to react, failed to take his due recourse, to take an eye for an eye. He hasn't even thanked me.

He begins to prepare his dinner from the rows of black and white labeled cans on his shelf. "Of course," I say, so that he could hear, "what else but generic food for the generic man," but he refuses to acknowledge me. He whistles happy tunes as the food slides out of the can in one great can-shaped lump. "Yum, yum," I say. He doesn't listen, continues breaking up the mass with a fork and turns on the radio. I can wait, there is no hurry for this last insight.

I sit down on his brown couch, a brown coffee table in front with sports magazines piled neatly on top. In high school the football coach persuaded him to join the team after seeing his track times and knowing that Harrison High was going to have a big, but incapable team for the next season. Harry was a receiver. Most guys who play high school football, at least the first string, are pretty popular in their schools, having all those young, nubile cheerleaders bouncing their pert tits and round pom-poms in their direction during and after games, but Harry never got the attention. You see, the quarterback, Chuck Bradley (doesn't that name demand respect?) stunk. Harry would go out on a post pattern, having dropped the secondary behind him like a wake behind a boat, and he'd be wide open, swinging his arms wildly in hopes that Chuckie boy might see him. But good old Chuck Bradley, the boy with the golden name, but not the golden arm, would be running around in circles in the backfield, dodging, twisting, bending, back-peddling, and scrambling from defensive linemen, anything to avoid the rush, anything but throw the ball. Chuck's dad, Harmon Bradley, standing proudly in the stands, would always say, "Boy, that boy is a scrambler," and in fact, that's what the Harrison Herald called him. Meanwhile, the opposing defense would call another blitz against "the scrambler," the quarterback with the slowest release in the state, and Harry would be in the end zone, frantically

waving the air, and no one would notice. So you can see why very few students or teachers in Harrison High School even remembered that Harry played football. The quarterback was always remembered and, as time went by, the fact that he took his team to a 2-6 record was forgotten, but his dodging ability was honored with phrases like, "That Chuck Bradley sure could scramble."

Harry eats his dinner methodically, munching, munching as he reads the latest sports magazine. He hums with the music on the radio from time to time.

You can imagine the ribbing Harry took in the locker room while he was a member of the Harrison Hawks. But the jokes and comments got meaner when, week after week, Harry's stats would show that he hadn't caught many passes. Human nature being what it is, Harry's low pass receiving percentage translated to--"the guy is a lousy receiver." This was exacerbated by the jock-snapping coach (a little test to make sure all his boys had one on and an opportunity to touch young boy meat) asking, "Caught any passes lately, Harry Foot?" and then laughing thickly. It has been my experience that adults, instead of rectifying a wrong, will often egg-on the meanness and cruelty of children. So the coach joined his team in that long football season in taking

out his frustrations on the boy with the funny name, funny looks, and who couldn't catch.

In the lurch was Harry. The atomic balm in the jock, the snapping of the towels, the hiding of the helmet--all tricks young men play on one another, like young bucks testing their budding antlers against one another in preparation for real battles in the future. But like that rare buck in nature with stunted antlers, its testicles having caught on a barbed wire fence, Harry came with weakened defenses. He just took the harassment. Maybe he was teased so much from the beginning that he became inured to it later in life.

The locker room episodes continued; at least once a week Harry would have some additional travail in his life because of his teammates' jokes. He knew his tormentors from the beginning this time, but he never struck back, never yelled, never got angry, he only became more careful, looking for traps or gags that had been set for him. And smiling merrily through each day.

The second insight I gave Harry was at his tenth-year high school reunion. Chuck Bradley was there, now the owner of a growing chain of sporting goods stores, a lovely wife and three perfect children. He came over to greet Harry, and Harry, slogging away in a linoleum factory since graduation so that he could live with his now-widowed mother, went to Chuck with that same wide-eyed innocence he

had when Jean took him to the woods. Chuck greeted him heartily and proceeded to let Harry know how well his life had been going. Harry listened carefully, nodded vigorously here and there, no mental machinations darting off to remind him of Chuckie's cruelties, to point out Chuck's bragging, to compare his life with Chuck's. None of that. He merely listened, and a joy started to pervade him that Chuck Bradley seemed to be a happy man.

I had been waiting for this moment: Harry like a fat cow in a lush field, taking it all in, chewing contentedly. Well, I was going to make him founder on all that sweet grass Chuck was feeding him. It required more effort on my part, but I coalesced all the jeering, the laughter, the stories that had been at Harry's expense for the last 10 years. He heard the stories about him that had been told all these years over dinner, on the golf course, to the new wives in the bedrooms. And finally, I let him see what Chuck Bradley was thinking right then, even as the happy stories of his life fell from his lips like pennies for the poor: the disdain he held for Harry, the scorn at how Harry dressed, even the ideas for jokes that could be played on him at the reunion for "old time's sake." All this I gave Harry, and he was rocked. His ridiculous grin fell away from him (yet the dimples remained, so hardened were they by that constant smile) and his feet were unsteady.

I thought I had him, and then the jock had to ask, with a semblance of sincerity, "Are you OK?"

Harry's grin turned on, recharged like an old battery, "I just got a little dizzy. Thanks for asking."

"You should watch that jungle juice, Harry, it'll get you every time," and he slapped him hard on the back.

They parted, and Harry's faith in the goodness of people had been not only restored, but strengthened. Oh, he got the information I sent, loud and clear, and he didn't forget it, it was in there, he just pushed it away and chose not to look at it.

This is what he's been doing to me all along. I give him the information and he refuses to use it. He's not a stupid man, though many think so; he has no friends, he prefers a hermit's existence; and he attends no church, synagogue or temple. He espouses no personal philosophy of life that I know of. He is an enigma to me, and frankly, I am tired of this happy little man who smiles constantly and appears to be contented all the time.

Oh, he's leery enough of people. That's why he's got all the locks, but he believes that his fellow human beings are inherently good. No original sin idea in Harry's head.

I'll admit that my third visit was not that strong, but it wasn't bad either. Simple--nice and simple. I'd hoped

that its lovely directness would dull Harry Foot's happy outlook like a needle pithing a frog. All I did was let Harry see the real motive behind all the externalities of people that he met in one day. Nice, huh? So, as he trudged to work he saw the newlywed couple in his neighborhood, always seemingly blissful to him, and he knew at once that the groom had married her for money and the bride had married him because he was the best bet just then.

Harry then saw the postman who always yelled a cheery hello to him and he knew instantly the stories the man had spread that Harry must have screwed his own mother all those years the two had lived alone in the house.

In the factory where Harry worked, he was finally aware of what his fellow workers thought and had said about him since he'd started there. And so on and so on. Like I said, it was simple--the thoughts were easy to transfer, they were short, not too complicated, but I had hoped that their sheer number and variety might overwhelm him.

Oh, for the day I worked on him he was even quieter than usual and he didn't have much for dinner that night: not even the boil-in-a-bag junk that he was buying at the time. But in the morning he woke up whistling and his brown eyes shone and his whole countenance was one of a man who had everything he could possibly want out of life. When he saw the newlywed couple the next day he nodded shyly, afraid to disrupt their happiness in each other; when the mail was

delivered he responded to the postman's yell with a wave, reminiscent of his football days when he would motion he was open; at work he was his same studious self, pressing vinyl sheets to look like Spanish Modern tiles. At lunch he ate his cheese sandwich near his co-workers, basking in their good-naturedness as they regaled each other with stories. And in all the other minor insights I had given him the day before, managing to act like I had never been there.

I wasn't terribly surprised though. It was a fast job, not a lot of thinking went into it. But I have been dismayed by his persistence in the face of reality time and time again. Well, tonight I'll know and we can stop this too long and much too distressing relationship we have carried on all these years.

He's finished his gruel, as I call it (a large can of macaroni and cheese tonight), and he's washing the dishes. Harry would never leave the dishes for the morning; never let them pile up until it made sense to do a big load instead of many small ones. No, he's always quite precise and neat. I know that after he finishes the washing he'll watch one hour of television (preferably sports), read for one hour, usually a book on some sports personality, do his complete ablutions (floss, brush, toilet), and then he'll sleep his full complement of eight hours, with nary a nightmare nor distressing thought.

Harry is halfway through a book on the old New York Jets. There's a cup of tea beside him. "My, a new addition to your ritual," I comment. "Harry, you continue to surprise me." He reads on in his father's Lazy Boy in the den, and brings the hot tea to his lips, sucking and slurping the liquid. The noise makes me angry so I go into his bedroom to wait. Since his mother's death Harry has moved into her much larger room, turning his old bedroom into a storeroom for his books.

The room isn't much different than when his mother lay here dying over a year ago. Oh, he's replaced antiquated doodads with his modern crip-crap: a ceramic Empire State Building his mother picked up on her honeymoon is gone and a plastic porpoise Harry got while visiting Ocean World while he was a kid is on display; the drugstore calendar has been usurped by a pro-football calendar; but Harry has kept on the bureau the piece of rock that his father took illegally from the Petrified Forest. Really, not much has changed.

It is in this bedroom that I felt I had finally cracked through his thick contentment. She had taken all summer to die, the only three months in this climate that allow you to leave the closeness of the house, and he had sat in this oppressive room, with its green walls, heavily shaded and

curtained windows, Victorian crazy quilt, all mingling in the heat and the stinky smell of the bed-bound.

She begged him not to take her to a hospital, she refused to let him hire a nurse, she whined and cried for him to stay with her. He did. Near the end, the last month or so when she was always in bed, he stayed with her all the time, only leaving for groceries or medicine, and using up the vacation time he'd saved for a trip to the Super Bowl.

When I arrived she had only a few hours left. She groaned as I stretched out beside her on the bed and he took her hand to ease her suffering. I looked up into her son's face. It was pinched with grief, the lips taut, the eyes small, but I also saw that the dimples remained, and a small glimmer in his eyes, like the pilot light of a furnace, letting me know that his optimism and trust in the goodness of the world was still on.

This was the time, when he was at his lowest, that I gave Harry a very special gift. I let him know all his mother's thoughts regarding her son that she had never voiced: she had not really wanted a child, she was disappointed that it was a boy, she hated his mincing ways that reminded her of her husband, she was dismayed by his looks and often avoided touching him, and she despised his weakness for staying with her. All the little utterances that she kept in her mind, never to be repeated, I repeated

for Harry. He knew and felt all the times he had exasperated her as a child, the secret pleasure she received as she spanked him with a wooden spoon, and her little burst of joy as he left the house each morning so she could watch television without interruptions. Even if she had these harsh thoughts only once, and been ashamed afterward, I let Harry have them.

He dropped her hand, left the room. He wept on the old brown couch and I could see his tears extinguishing the small flame within.

I was pleased. But I was also angry at myself. I should have thought of this sooner and then I wouldn't have had to make so many trips. I should have known that the key was his mother, she was his only family, his only friend, especially since his father's death. On the other hand, it is possible that the other gifts of insight had contributed. Perhaps they had each chipped small chinks into his implacable trust of mankind.

Mrs. Foot died that afternoon while Harry watched football and read his books in his father's chair. He made all the arrangements for the funeral but wouldn't attend. He didn't react violently to my fourth gift, that was too much to ask for I suppose, but when I left, Harry Foot was a somber, unhappy man. I knew this state would only be temporary and that what would be left would be a more mature, more enlightened Harry who could see the truth of

the world. Even the dimples weren't as deep, though they'd probably never leave completely, but their force was definitely gone. Or so I thought.

I felt dumbfounded when I was informed that Harry had snapped back into his happy, naive way of life. After all, his perseverance has been a thorn in my side, a kind of professional embarrassment for me. Now, as I see him sleeping beside me, in the same room where his beloved mother died, I see no signs of my gifts. He sleeps as he did before. Somehow in the last year he has regained his lost hope, and I thought I might find some evidence of how he did this--perhaps a friend or lover, but there is no one. All is the same. He has cheapened my gifts and I hate him for this.

Tonight, now, I will give him his final insight and we shall see who is the stronger. I enter his unconscious, flowing in and out among the memories. He still sleeps. I grasp at particular episodes, specific thoughts, until I hold a handful of moments of self-hatred. There are surprisingly few, as if someone has done spring cleaning.

"I am aware of your presence." Harry's voice comes to me, loud.

"Well, well, little man," I say, mentally easing back into a more comfortable position. "You surprise me. I didn't think you were aware of anything anymore"

"Of course I know you," he says, and he appears in his mind to me, not the Harry that exists, but as a man who looks much like Joe Namath.

"I have brought you one more gift, Harry." I offer him the black wrapped box filled with his self-hatred.

He ignores me. He struts around like a football jock making over a million a year and pretends that he doesn't see my present.

"I am tired of your vile gifts," he says. "I do not need your warped reality nor your hatred. Leave me."

And the idiot suits up, runs into a stadium filled with people, goes out for a long pass and fights his way to the goal line. "Touchdown," he yells, and he spikes the ball, happily paying the \$500 fine as the crowd roars wildly.

Mr. and Mrs. Foot run from the stands to hug their son. He has made the winning touchdown. "We're so proud of you!" they shout. Harry beams.

As I look on from the sideline I see how my other gifts have been subsumed. Jean Justin bounces past me, her scant cheerleader outfit revealing a figure that she never had. She carries two black pom-poms; a gold ribbon ties her hair. She joins in the family celebration under the goal post.

In the stands I see the postman, the newlyweds, Harry's fellow workers--all cheering his touchdown. At the end of the field is Chuck Bradley, dismally twisting his toe on the artificial turf. He is the quarterback for the defeated

team. Above, in a \$30,000 a year enclosed glass suite, is Chuck's father, Harmon Bradley. He is gesticulating wildly, his face in a rage, but he is soundless from his booth.

"Now Harry, this has gone on too long," I say, and I step forward with my gift held out. "Why don't you see what I brought you this time."

Harry looks at me and then at the small box in my hand. He grins and the crowd disappears, and his parents and Jean are gone. Harry and I stand face-to-face on the 50-yard line in the empty stadium. His football uniform is gone and he wears his usual out-of-fashion clothes, but he looks different than the Harry I know. He appears taller, his mind is lively, full of jokes and funny stories and he grins a little. The only thing I recognize as the Harry I know is that stupid glimmer in his eyes which I now see as laughter. He holds out his hand to me, opens it, and offers me a box wrapped in black and gold. "For you," he says, and he smiles broadly.

I accept it. At once I am filled with all the moments when I have made others aware: husbands knowing their wives' fantasies do not include them; children learning they weren't wanted; couples, married for decades, learning through me that their mate is tired of their company. All the myriad revelations that I have given are revealed to me through their eyes. But there is more. Harry also gives me these people's thoughts after I have left. A few, as I had

told myself, are made stronger by the knowledge. Most are devastated. All are sadder. Harry fills me with these emotions until I am stuffed and groggy in my gorging. I ask him to stop and the thoughts vanish.

Appearing again in his football uniform, his dimples deep from his smile, he hikes the ball to me. "Throw me a bomb," he yells, and he races down the field.

Papa's Last Best Wife

Papa's Last Best Wife

Papa stretched languidly, his right paw reaching, then resting on Straw's cheek. "Is it time to get up, my love?" Straw murmured sleepily. She turned on her side, facing the cat, their noses touching on the pillow. Papa purred deeply. "You're such a good boy," she said lovingly, kissing his warm neck. Papa's purring grew louder and he nuzzled against her nose. He lay on his side, covered to his chest by the light sheet, his head on the pillow.

Outside the closed bedroom door, other cats, having heard Straw's voice, began meowing and poking their paws under the door. "Your queens are calling, should I answer them or make them wait?" Papa merely blinked. The meowing grew louder. Straw sat up in bed, careful not to disturb Papa, threw on a flowered kimono robe and slipped her feet into rubber thongs. After using the bathroom, she quickly brushed her long, flax-colored hair.

A loud burst of insistent meows greeted her as she opened the door, shutting it quickly behind her. In the now

silent bedroom, Papa stretched once more, licked a paw, and dozed again.

"Shush now, shh, shh," Straw whispered to the four female cats. She opened two cans of cat food and mixed it with dry kibbles, working quickly to quiet the cats. They swarmed about her, rubbing their bodies in and out between her legs and against her calves. Mary jumped on the counter to hurry her. "Just give me a minute, girls, I'll have it for you in a second." She placed two large bowls of food on the floor and the cats jockeyed for position as they crouched down to eat.

Straw toasted a piece of bread for herself, poured a glass of grapefruit juice and opened the sliding glass door and the screen door that led to the small, brick patio. She ate her breakfast at a round, cast-iron table, its white paint cracking and peeling on its decorative curliques. Bright waxy leaves from a large ficus tree formed a canopy over the private enclave. Staghorn ferns hung from the tree in moss-filled, wire baskets. On the eight-foot tall cyprus fence enclosing the patio, Straw's collection of orchids trailed out of hanging pots, their lavender and pink colors showy amid the green vegetation and the aging gray fence.

"So, you're done already."

Hadley waddled out to the patio, sat in a spot of sun and began a serious licking of her face and paws. Pauline arrived a moment behind her and Martha a few minutes later.

The three cats sat near each other frantically licking and grooming their fur in a flurry of pink tongues.

They were all Siamese cats, though different colors. Hadley was a lilac-point, her legs, tail, ears, and face--her points--a light colored gray, her body a cream color. Pauline was a sealpoint, the original color of the Siamese. Her points were silky black, her body light brown. Martha's points were not so ebony, but brownish; she was a chocolate-point. And Mary, who entered the patio long after the other cats had finished eating, and jumped on the table to inspect Straw's breakfast, had points of dark charcoal and a smoky colored body; Mary was a blue-point and the youngest. All the cat's eyes were hues of blue, ranging from a rich deep cobalt to an icy cornflower depending on the cat and the light.

Straw stroked her fingers along Mary's backbone, the cat's hips rising to her light touch, her tail pointing to the sky. She rubbed Mary's slender sides, so thin compared to the bulging pregnant bellies of Hadley, Pauline and Martha. "You're going to have to be more receptive to Papa's advances," Straw scolded as she kissed Mary's head.

Mary refused to submit to Papa. When the other three cats came into heat six weeks earlier, Straw let the tom in the patio with one of the queens on three successive nights. Each became pregnant. Mary, at seven months, was in her first heat; she would crouch low on the carpet, making low

guttural noises, rubbing her belly on the carpet, her hind end raised. Though Straw had worked to have all the queens in heat at the same time, producing two litters a year from each cat, she decided to mate the young cat now. Becoming attached to Mary would prove bad for business, she knew.

Even as a kitten, Mary acted differently from the others. She longed to be with Straw, insisted on sitting on her lap, cried when Straw left. Straw's internal balance, an uneasy equilibrium kept only by rigid self-control, had slipped from time to time since buying Mary. Straw found herself thinking of the cat often; brought her toys; even looked forward to the cat's excited greeting.

But when it came to mating with Papa, Mary failed Straw. For the past two nights Straw had placed Mary in the patio with Papa. While she watched through the screen door, the tom circled the queen, sniffing at her. At first, Mary hissed or tried to run away, but when Papa became more aggressive, Mary would sit down, folding her tail under her. That first night Papa grew tired of chasing her, turned away, backed up to the gardenia bush, and sprayed. He would not chase her. Last night papa had broken her skin while holding her neck in his mating grip. Mary cried out in pain, twisted away, and Straw brought her in the house, the

mating attempt failing again. Papa stalked off, licking a stray hair on his shoulder into place.

"I'm not going to put up with you being so cold to him," she said as she finished her toast. "Tonight you better play your part." Straw sat back in the uncomfortable wrought iron chair, drew her leg to her chest and chewed on a fingernail as she watched Mary. The other three female cats lay stretched out on the sunny bricks, paws, legs, and heads intertwined so that it was difficult to differentiate one cat from another. Mary, still on the table, drummed her back paws rhythmically to Straw's stroking. She gave a plaintive meow. Papa looked out onto the patio from behind the bedroom window screen.

Susan "Straw" Morrison moved to Key West when her latest live-in man friend decided their relationship was "going nowhere," as he put it. He was the last in a long succession of men, both weekend wonders (as her women friends categorized them) and significant others (as the magazine psychologists tagged them), that had shared her life and heart, in small and great ways, and then left. Most of the breakups had been conciliatory--both Straw and the man agreeing that it was "time to move on." Others had occurred at Straw's insistence, "It just isn't going to work." But two relationships had touched her with such happiness and contentment that she never dreamed they didn't

feel the same about her. When they left, saying "I'm sorry," or "let's stay friends," or "I really thought we might have had something," she felt abandoned and remembered a time as a child, enchanted with her image in a clothing store's three-way mirror, when she panicked to find that her mother had gone to another department in the store.

These "important relationships," another term she learned from a psychologist's column in a woman's magazine and counseling sessions at a local community clinic when she tried to reconnect herself to the world, wore her down and tired her out. The counseling proffered so many doubts about herself that her head jangled with terminology, self-criticism (tempered by self-love), relaxation methods, and imagery techniques. Her usually quiet nature became more withdrawn, circumspect, until she second guessed herself on every move. "Am I doing this because I really want to," she would ask herself, "or because I am trying to please my father," "or because I am trying to irritate him," "or because" She quit her saleswoman job at a fashionable Minneapolis clothing store, packed her belongings in her Datsun pickup, and drove to Key West. She chose Key West because it is warm, or because an aunt sent a postcard years ago of a piece of Key Lime pie with the recipe on the back, or because it was as far away as she could drive in the country. She didn't know why she chose Key West and she decided to stop trying to figure it out.

She merely phoned her mother, sister, and brother, told them she was leaving, and then drove through a blizzard of snow, a flat landscape of crusty stubble fields, hills of brown leafless trees, acres of orange groves, long linking bridges between the Florida Keys, and emerged finally into lush, green Key West.

For four years she had lived in this town of tourists and Conchs, as the people born in Key West called themselves. Though she shed her winter clothes and adopted the free and loose style of a town that harbored a gay community, left-over hippies and honest-to-God fishermen, Straw remained coiled, refusing to unleash the fear of herself that journeyed down with her from up north.

Only now, in the few months of living with Mary, could Straw feel a loosening of some inner binding, as if, finally, the northern chill within her was thawing in the Florida warmth.

It was 7:30 a.m. and the slats of sunlight were needling through the ficus tree leaves and warming the patio. Mary had danced and purred so much while Straw stroked her that she stretched out on the table, tired, one eye always on her mistress. She jumped up and followed Straw into the kitchen when she took her breakfast dishes inside.

Straw opened the bedroom door, careful not to let the other cats in where Papa lay curled on her pillow. She

hurried now, slipping her bony legs into shorts, pulling a short-sleeved knit shirt over her head, sliding canvas shoes on sockless feet, and tying her long hair back into a ponytail. The outfit accentuated her rigid, thin figure, drew one's attention to the pale blue eyes, flat chest, and white, northern skin that she took care to cover with sunscreen. Most people thought her nickname alluded to her reedy, straw-like body, but the name derived from a shortened version of "Strawberry," given to her by her brother when he saw the pink, chubby baby. The cherubic infant lost its baby fat, became a girl of average proportion, developed into a teenager of model-like slimness, but somehow kept decreasing, until now, at 27, she looked painfully gaunt. The name Strawberry, apt until about age 17, shortened easily and readily to Straw.

Before leaving for work, Straw stretched out face down on the bed, slid Papa off the pillow, placed him on his back beneath her chest. His body was limp, still sleepy, and he allowed her to kiss and nuzzle the dark fur of his belly as her hands cradled his head. Papa was also a Siamese, but not a purebred like the queens. His body coloring had deepened from brown to sable, his points shown inky black and his deep blue eyes glowed against the black fur of his face. Straw loved to slide her face down his belly and breathe in the warm scent of his sleek fur. Papa sighed and stretched, his big tom head supported by her thin fingers,

his front paws limply curled in the air, his back legs splayed around her bony chest.

"I've gotta go," she said as she kissed his muzzle. And as she hopped off the bed he rolled over and licked the spots where she had mussed his fur. She opened a window for him that led out into the patio, shut the bedroom door, and then made sure that Hadley, Pauline, Martha, and Mary were locked in the house. "Good-bye girls," she said as she left. Mary tried to go with her and Straw bent down, pushing her back and closing the door at the same time. The three pregnant cats, twined together on a rattan chair, slept through her farewell; Mary watched Straw through the screen from a window sill, meowed sadly as Straw's stick-like form walked jaggedly down the shaded sidewalk and out of sight.

It was March, the tail end of the busy tourist season. The conch train, small tourist coaches pulled by a phony "locomotive," still pulled its loads of visitors around old Key West, its loudspeakers indistinctly blaring the highlights of the town's history. The Key West residents grouched about the tourists, made fun of them behind their backs, but could not live without their dollars. Old Key West covered only a few square miles, preserved in a area where landmarks and Victorian homes stood on narrow brick streets hemmed in by lush Florida shrubs and trees. Broad

avenues looked to the ocean. Tourists packed the town in the winter, visiting the Audubon mansion, gawking at Mel Fisher's salvaged gold, eating Key Lime pie, or ordering hurricanes at "Sloppy Joe's," one of Hemingway's frequent stops. Street vendors hawked conch fritters, shell jewelry, or hand-painted T-shirts featuring palm trees, Conan, or huge, lifelike breasts. Tourists took their photographs beside the red, black and white painted monument that marked the southernmost point in the continental U.S. An open-air market, a block long, extended north along the boardwalk, with tables of sea shells, dried seahorses, and conchs, the red meaty animal removed, the shell cut so that a practiced trumpet-like blow produced a resonant, deep-toned sound.

Straw visited all these attractions when she moved to the Keys. She rode the Conch Train four times, trying to remember the street names to orient herself. She held a gold bar that had been buried for 200 years in the hull of a Spanish galleon sunken off the Florida coast. She tried a bite of Key Lime pie but found it too sweet. And she visited Hemingway's Key West home.

A guide led Straw and the other visitors through the large home, moving slowly from room to room, giving time for each person to peer at the bathroom, glimpse the view through the kitchen window, gawk at the bed. Before air-conditioning, the guide explained, homes in Florida were

built to stay cool. High ceilings, heavy wooden shutters on the windows, and long overhangs kept the heat out. The tourists listened carefully. Mounted heads of gazelle, water buffalo, springbok and zebra gazed down at the streams of pilgrims who filed quietly through the house.

The group made its way out the back door of the home, crossed a small patio, and wended its way slowly up an iron staircase attached on the outside of a separate building to Hemingway's study. Once in the author's den, where he wrote daily, the visitors lingered. They scanned the furniture, read the titles of books in the cases, asked, "How many words a day did he write?" As they left the study, two people hung back and furtively reached over the gold velvet rope cordoning off the author's desk. They touched his typewriter reverently before they hurried down the steps to join the others.

When the tour of the Hemingway home finished Straw breathed deeply. The heavy persian rugs smelling of mothballs and the aging animal heads depressed her. Outside, the ample yard was secluded, filled with tall flowering trees and planted with colorful shrubs and plants. A serene, aqua-painted pool stood to one side, its saltwater channeled from the ocean. But the most surprising of all to Straw and the other tourists were the cats and kittens everywhere. They peeked from under bushes, slept on porch chairs, stalked mockingbirds on the lawn, or lounged boldly

on the veranda, tourists stepping over their sunning bodies. Straw petted the friendly ones, watched the others.

Though the tour was over, she sat in one of the lawn chairs in the shade of a palm tree. Two cats ambled over to Straw and she pet them slowly, liking the feel of their soft fur under her hand. "Why are all these cats here?" a newly arrived tourist asked her as he walked up to Straw. Deeply tanned and carrying an old boyscout rucksack, he looked vaguely like one of Straw's old loves, but most men seemed to have something, if only an essence, of one of her past rejections.

She answered his question as the tour guide had explained: "Hemingway liked them and now they've all bred and had kittens."

"God, I'd love to have one," the young man said, and he scratched one of the cat's ears roughly, as you would a dog's ears. The cat moved under Straw's chair, and the man, hearing an announcement that the next tour was about to begin, hurried away to join the others. A copy of The Old Man and the Sea stuck out of the pocket on his backpack. The cat under the chair came out and sat near Straw. He had a round head and small ears, a thick body. One front paw had seven toes, a good luck sign, that made him look like a baseball catcher. When Straw got up to leave, slipping through the red-flowered hibiscus bushes lining the property, the cat followed her. She bent over to scratch

under his chin, "You better stay here." Another line of tour buses arrived at the home, the bulky vehicles barely able to maneuver on the narrow street. People made their way hurriedly up the walk to the house. Straw watched the people, their eyes scanning the house and yard, taking in everything. The cat rolled upside-down on her foot and with a sweet grin on her pale face, Straw picked him up and carried him out of sight of the house and the tours.

Six months later Straw pulled a child's red wagon with a box of four kittens out to the boardwalk an hour before sunset. Each night, overlooking the gray ocean, street performers, and sellers of merchandise vied again for the tourists' attention and dollars. Unrehearsed, the daily entertainment on the boardwalk came alive--sword swallowers, bagpipe players, broken glass walkers, high wire artists, and jewelry, cookie, and shell dealers. Hundreds of people filled the boardwalk--sounds of applause, hawking, and music drowned out the lap of the water against the cement pillars of the boardwalk. Only at sunset, as the sun became a distinct red ball on the long horizon, did the noise of the people stop as they all turned to watch. A bagpiper played his mournful song to accompany the setting sun.

Straw's arrival on the boardwalk required some research. A visit to the local library provided her with an encyclopedia synopsis of Hemingway's life and works.

Accordingly, she named the big tomcat she stole, Papa, Hemingway's nickname; she named the Siamese female she bought from a breeder, Hadley, after Hemingway's first wife; and she tried to read one of his books but found it too violent. Instead, she scanned some of his works and wrote down the names of characters and places. For that first business venture on the boardwalk, Straw's sign read: "Own a Hemingway cat--Kilimanjaro, Santiago, Nick or Maria sired by Papa and Hadley--\$50." She sold Nick and Maria the first night, the other two the next.

For awhile she advertised the kittens in cat magazines, but she received few orders when she had to explain that the cats weren't registered. Though the boardwalk business remained busy, Straw felt certain that there was another angle. One day, a somber-faced, bearded man approached her table. Only one kitten, from Hadley's latest litter, sat in the box, crying sadly for its litter mates. Francis, as Straw had named him, was a runt. The kitten was small and misshapen, its head too large, its body scrawny. The bearded man approached, read her sign, and lifted the kitten ceremoniously from its cardboard box. He held it at eye level, spoke to the runt respectfully: "Francis, we will have a life together writing great books." He paid cash. From then on, Straw placed ads in literary publications and soon she had a waiting list for Papa's offspring. In

four years she added Pauline, Martha, and Mary to Papa's harem, sold over 60 kittens, and upped the price to \$550.

"Morning Straw." Straw entered the work room of the Key West Fabric Shoppe, tied her apron about her, the ties looping around her waist twice. She'd worked in the fabric shop for eight months, pouring the dyes and pushing the rollers across the silkscreen to make the distinctive Key West fabric. As Straw and the other employees silkscreened bolts of white cloth, transforming them into the bright material, tourists watched from protected areas as guides explained the process. Oranges, lime-greens, fuschia-pinks and bright lemons took shape in large shell designs, swirling flowers or ocean waves. At first the fabric colors were offensive to Straw. She couldn't imagine anyone wearing clothes made from the fabric as she remembered the muted tweeds, soft gray flannels and cream-colored silks in the clothes she used to sell in Minneapolis. But lately she found herself admiring some of the bolts; holding the turquoise shell pattern fabric up to her face as she looked in the mirror, even bringing home a small piece of electric blue cloth designed with swarms of angel fish. She made a pillow for Mary from the blue fabric. "This will look so pretty against your gray fur," she said as she placed the cat on the pillow. Mary promptly sat down and kneaded her paws happily.

At lunchbreak one of Straw's co-workers offered her some homemade cookies she'd brought from home. Straw declined as usual, unwilling to partake in the food or the communal chatter of her fellow employees. One of them, Phil, had asked her out twice--once to watch the hydroplane races in Big Pine Marina ("Come on, Miss Budweiser is going to defend her title"), another time to go snorkeling ("You can't believe the colors; how quiet it is"). Straw said no to both offers, afraid to show an interest in this man who smiled so easily and cracked jokes so readily with all of them.

When he tried to persuade her to have a beer after work and she shook her head, "no," he asked in desperation, "Don't you like to have any fun?"

None of the bright colors surrounding her in Key West were part of Straw's childhood. The remembered family scenes were indistinct and fuzzy, lacking sharp images and clear meanings. In fact, there existed nothing in Straw's memory for her to cling to in anger, or fear, or joy. As she worked in the fabric shop, rolling the vivid paints onto the dull base fabric, she would think back to her family and try to recall something, some word or action to elicit pleasure or anger in her.

Her brother and sister were the most ghostlike to her, Older by 12 and 15 years, they had left the house before Straw knew them. Like distant cousins, they arrived

periodically for holidays, electrifying the usually quiet house with talk and laughter that frightened Straw and transformed her parents into people she didn't know.

Straw's mother, Annabelle, was so contained and removed that when someone in Key West asked Straw about her, she could only recite her social activities as outlined in her most recent letter.

Her father, Landon, insulated himself with his work. Quiet and subdued, only at dinner would he speak with animation. An oncologist, he regaled his wife and daughter with stories of his cancer patients. "They still come in for chemotherapy and radiation, even days before their deaths, barely able to walk, 80 pounds left of a 190-pound man, they still hold on to hope," he would tell them earnestly. Annabelle would look at her husband in admiration, while Straw sat quietly, frightened by her father's unfamiliar intensity.

He died instantly in an automobile accident. How sad, Straw thought, that he couldn't have had a noble, lingering death like his patients he so admired. Straw grieved more for the manner of his death than for his death.

At 4:00 the employees at the fabric shop stopped the machines and cleaned up the spilled dyes, the rollers and the tables. At 5:00 they left, and Phil, as he did nearly every Friday, asked Straw to join him surf-casting in the

long Florida twilight. She surprised him by answering, "Maybe some other time." In the past she had always answered with a quick "no."

As she turned the key to her small home Mary meowed a greeting. Straw smiled, gathered the young cat into her arms; Mary purred and kneaded the air in excitement. The other three queens were in much the same position as when Straw left, but had moved from the chair to the sofa. They lifted sleepy heads, blinked slowly at Straw. Papa only came to the house late at night or early in the morning.

Straw heated a frozen dinner and ate slowly while watching television. Mary sat on the TV, her tail drooping over the screen, ignoring Straw's attempts to get her to move. As soon as Straw would lift her off the TV, the cat would jump back and stare at Straw, demanding attention. Finally Straw laughed, lifted the cat onto her lap to talk to her.

"So, you think you're something special, don't you." Mary rubbed her cheek on Straw's bony knuckles, marking her with her cat scent. Yes, you're a good girl, and so pretty!" Straw danced with the music on the television as she held Mary's body against her, the cat's charcoal colored paw in her hand. Mary meowed and purred in delight.

Straw waltzed about the room with the cat, then stretched out on the floor, her thin body tired with the exertion. Mary carried a catnip mouse out from under the

sofa, a gift Straw had bought for her, and asked her to throw it.

"Oh, you want so much from me," Straw teased as she threw the mouse down the hall. Mary chased after it, brought it back and dropped it for her to toss again. Straw laughed delightedly, threw it again, this time into the bathroom. They kept at the game for more than half an hour until Mary deliberately left the toy mouse under a chair, walked back and sat on Straw's lap. "So, you're tired now," and she lifted the cat to her face, nuzzled it with her own. Mary rubbed back, closing her eyes.

Straw fell asleep on the floor, Mary on top of her. Papa's rough meow awoke her late at night, she could see his dark form on the patio outside the sliding glass door, scratching the screen. Mary hid behind Straw's prone body, her eyes riveted on the tom outside.

In the dark patio, Papa stalked, waiting for the queen in heat. He sniffed her scent through the screen, lifting his head up and down almost daintily, his eyes closed. Then he walked over to the ficus tree, turned around with his tail straight up, and shot a thin stream of urine on the smooth trunk.

"Come on, baby, it's time." Straw stood up and held the frightened cat in her arms. Hadley, Pauline, and Martha crouched near the screen, their tails swishing back and forth in excitement. Straw turned off the television and

carried Mary out to the patio, the lamps from inside making a rectangle of light on the bricks. "Come on, come on now, let go," she said as she released each paw from her shirt where Mary's claws dug in. She lowered the cat to the bricks, holding the queen's shoulders down with one hand, stroking Mary between her ears with the other. "It's not so bad, my love." Strolling out from the bushes where he had hidden, Papa sniffed the air again and started toward Mary, held down by Straw. "I'm sorry, baby," Straw whispered. Mary looked up at Straw, meowed and tried to rise, her legs pushing hard against the bricks. "Poor baby, don't cry, don't cry," Straw said as one of her own tears rolled onto her hand holding Mary. The queen meowed again, a soft mew-like sound, as Papa started to straddle her. Straw's tears fell off her face onto the bricks and with a quick movement she picked up Mary and carried her into the house. Papa hissed, scrambling into the dense bushes. Inside the house, Straw calmed the frightened cat, walking from room to room with her, and hugged her dearly to her chest.

Diamond in a Square

Diamond in a Square

Two-inch squares of cloth in pinks, blues, yellows, and whites stood in piles on the table in front of her.

Meticulously she pinned one square to another, matching the penciled seam lines she had drawn; first she pinned the corners, then the middle of each drawn line. She picked up her threaded size 11 needle, so small that her large, knobby fingers nearly hid it, and then made minute stitches in a straight line.

All through the winter she added squares to squares and rows to rows. When the month of April arrived, she was nearly finished with the quilt. She had only eight rows to go, and now the placement of pastel colors formed an intricate pattern. She chose her fabric carefully so that the squares created three-dimensional blocks, stacked one on top of another in an overall pyramid effect. The block appeared to be securely balanced, but, if seen from another angle, they were ready to fall, their dependence on the

block beneath them precarious. The pattern was called "Tumbling Blocks."

"There, I'm almost finished, how do you like it Ted?" and she held up the colorful quilt to an empty chair. "I'll take it to the baby shower today so that Emily and Patricia can see it, but then I'll bring it home to finish." The quilt was for Pat Hall's soon-to-be-born first child.

Outside, the early spring she had hoped for was not to be. Crocuses sagged under the crystals of a late snow and the young leaves of the maples stayed furled. The grey of the streets and the sky merged, and the old, heaped snow would not melt. The flat face of her apartment building showed six neat rows of windows, some curtained, some open. Only on the second floor, two apartments from the end, was a hint of spring--the brightly colored fabric squares held in the hands of Grace.

She sat at her small kitchen table and leaned her body toward the picture window to catch the low light as she pieced the pastel squares together. Grace was 67; she never lied about her age, the thought would never have occurred to her. She wore her hair as she had as a young girl, only now the two tight braids wrapped like a crown about her head were grey instead of blonde. She was careful in her dress and always pressed her clothes so that the collars of her blouses and dresses looked starched, the creases in her slacks were sharp, and her hems laid flat. And though her

face was wrinkled and her hands were covered with brown spots, her blue eyes still looked as they had when she was a child, as if they were still able to look upon her world with innocence and open acceptance. Her eyes were so clear, in fact, that she had never needed glasses--even for her fine and intricate sewing.

In her apartment she surrounded herself with her creations: white laced doilies, a light-green crocheted afghan, needlepoint pillows in yellow and blue stripes, and a cross-stitched bellpull picturing the flowers of spring. On the twenty-first of September, December, March, and June, she changed all the handmade accessories so the colors matched the new season. The out-of-season items she stored in carefully labeled boxes in her bedroom and in each box she placed one or two mothballs. If she had known that her apartment and all it contained smelled faintly of chemicals, she would have thrown out the preservatives. But she had become used to the smell and her friends never thought to bother her with such matters.

Grace finished wrapping the unfinished quilt in blue and pink dotted paper and then she cleared the table. "I think we should have a little lunch," she said.

She placed a pan of soup on the stove, set the table for two and when the soup bubbled, ladled it into two bowls. "It's good to have something warm on a day like this. Yes, I thought you'd like it," she said. And as she ate she

prattled on to the empty chair across the table, her blue eyes darting from her soup to his as she discussed plans for a summer vacation.

After lunch she poured his soup back into the pot to save for leftovers, washed the dishes, dried them, and returned them to their places in her cupboards. As she worked she carried on a conversation. "Emily is going to pick me up early so that I can help set things up for the party," she said as she wiped the stove. "She'll give me a ride home, too, so you don't have to worry about getting me. I should be back around six. If you get hungry, just have some of the cold chicken in the icebox."

Emily drove into the apartment building parking lot, gave a honk of the horn, twice quickly, and waited. She and Grace had been friends for a long time. As young girls they went to movies together on Saturdays, dreaming of meeting Clark Gable and Gary Cooper. As adolescents they double-dated, laughing in the ladies' room at the antics of their dates. As married women they called each other with cleaning questions, met for lunch to giggle over old stories, and cried in each other's arms when tragedies, small and large, came crashing in on them. Now, as old women, both alone, they kept each other busy with church bazaars, gardening clubs, and voter registration drives.

Grace was watching for Emily at her picture window. "There's Emily now, Ted, I'll be back soon," and she grabbed the blue and pink wrapped present and shut the door on her empty apartment.

"Hello Dear," Emily said as Grace struggled to close the car door, "I'm sorry I didn't get out but I just had my hair done and the wind is blowing so."

While there was no doubt that Grace was an elderly woman, with her grey hair, simple dress, and untouched face, Emily had decided to fight her age for as long as possible. She wore shiny red rouge and dark red lipstick to make up for the loss of color in her faded face, thick foundation cream attempted to smooth out her wrinkles, and her permed thinning hair rose in tight tinted curls. She dressed conservatively, but in fashion, using her late husband's pension to live in a manner she had never been allowed when her husband Allan was alive. She missed him, to be sure, but she had found a freedom when he died three years ago, a lifting of wifely duties, that she had never thought possible in her life again. She felt rejuvenated and very much alive. In the first year after his death she bought a new Dodge Dart and a Wurlitzer organ; she reupholstered her furniture, and toured on two cruises, one to Mexico, another up the Inland Passage in Alaska.

Emily and Grace's friendship extended over forty years and most who saw the two women thought they were sisters.

Their appearances were very different, but they showed such ease together, touching each other unconsciously as they talked, comfortable with silence, or laughing spontaneously as they drove by a child being pulled by a large, shaggy dog on its leash.

If Grace didn't like the heavy makeup her friend wore, she would never say so. And if Emily grew tired of hearing about Ted, she never let Grace know. These issues were not important to these women, it was their friendship that allowed them to ignore each other's idiosyncrasies and embrace the rest.

"Isn't it a shame to have this weather for Pat's party," Emily said as she drove along slush-filled streets. She turned her wipers on as the wet snow began to fall again. "I hope everyone will come."

"I'm sure they will, everyone is so anxious to see Patricia again."

Patricia was Emily's youngest daughter. She was 38, over eight months pregnant, large and uncomfortable. The baby shower was her mother's idea. If Pat had known she was going to have to endure another party she might have stayed in the Middle East with her husband and had the baby in one of the American hospitals. They had been in Saudi for seven years working for an oil company; he as an engineer, she as an accountant.

As she saw the napkins printed with yellow umbrellas, matching paper plates, and a large pink paper elephant proclaiming in large block letters, "Your Baby's on the Way!" Patricia was reminded of the baby shower her staff had given her before she left for the States. Her secretaries, administrative assistants, and even the office cleaning lady had gathered in the typing pool, strewn it with pink and blue streamers and yelled "Surprise!" as she walked in. She had entered the room intending to reprimand one of them for a typographical error on an important document.

Patricia had always thought that parties were frivolous--a way to disguise the truth. The reality of being a year older was hidden with a birthday celebration, the years of marriage droned by in anniversaries, and the pain of childbirth was camouflaged among the pink and blue of the baby shower. "It's all a waste of time," she thought as she stood in her mother's remodeled living room and drew on her cigarette. "Let's just get this party over and we can get on with it." She scowled at the enormity of her belly.

Patricia, as she preferred to be called, was a woman of intelligence and practicality. She had discovered her interest in mathematics in high school. She liked the dependability of the numbers, and that mathematical problems were clear and precise, that they would always work out to the same answer every time. Once she made her decision to

study accounting she had pursued her goal in an unerring manner: four years of college, two years of graduate school, five years with an accounting firm in Los Angeles, and the work in the Middle East.

She had married two years ago, not for love or a fear of loneliness, but because she and her friend Richard had realized that marriage opened the door to many social and career advancements in their organization. Not that they were incompatible; they did like each other's company. The marriage had proved to be another correct move in Patricia's scheme for life.

The pregnancy, however, was not working as she had planned. In retrospect, she could see now that the decision to become pregnant had been made in haste and doubt. She had never imagined herself childless, had assumed that sometime she would be a mother, but the question of "when?" was always put off with a nebulous "sometime." When she became 38 the gnawing fear that time was running out began to grow to such proportion that she decided to become pregnant. She had mistaken fear for a longing for motherhood. Now, as the time drew closer for the birth of the child, she realized that she had made a mistake. So fearful was she, in fact, that she could not admit to

herself that she felt any love for the child within her; so she squashed these emotions with her anger at her misstep.

Emily and Grace entered the house carefully balancing a three-tiered cake through the kitchen door, a plastic stork perched among the sugared roses on top.

"We're home, Pat, come and see your Aunt Grace."

Patricia shoved her cigarette into an ashtray and sighed heavily.

"Patricia, Oh, Patricia, you look beautiful," Grace crooned to the large woman as she went to hug her.

"It's good to see you again, Grace," and she smelled the mothball odor that she always associated with her mother's friend.

Pat could never understand what her mother saw in Grace. At one time, when Patricia was a teenager, she had spent several Saturday mornings with Aunt Grace, as she was instructed to call her, trying to learn how to sew. The sewing lessons were her mother's idea and they had been a disaster. Patricia hated messing with the material, sitting at the machine, and finally ending up with a foolish, frilly apron she had never worn.

In her mind, Pat called Grace "Graceless," and scorned her for her old dresses, and peasant hairstyle. She thought her mother was of a higher class than Grace.

Emily and Grace scurried about the house for the next two hours, hanging balloons and crepe streamers and writing the guests' names on yellow nametags shaped like storks.

"Come and see how everything looks, Pat," Emily called into the bedroom where her daughter rested. Patricia tromped into the room. She towered over her mother and Grace, dwarfed them in size as well as in demeanor. Her mother wore a coral colored pantsuit while Grace had on a blue floral print dress that Patricia had seen three years ago when she last visited. Patricia, covered in a stylish black and white maternity dress, stood in the midst of the brightly colored balloons, the looping blue and pink streamers, and the paper cups filled with pastel dinner mints.

The doorbell rang announcing the first of the guests. "It looks great," Patricia said.

To Grace the baby shower was a special event. Patricia had told her mother she didn't have any friends still living in the area, so all of the guests were friends of hers and Emily and they were all happy with the thought of the baby. When Patricia opened the gifts, tearing at the yellow ducks and pink flowers on the paper, there were sighs of admiration and delight at the tiny jumpers, the frilly socks, the bonnet, the teething ring, and the gaily-colored

mobile. But the greatest moment for Grace arrived when her package was placed in Pat's hands.

"Before you open it," Grace said, "I have to tell you that it's not finished yet. I should be able to have it done in a couple of weeks."

Patricia tore off the wrapping, opened the box, and lifted the beautifully pieced quilt from its tissue wrap bed. She held it for all to see, the way Grace had shown it to her husband.

"It's lovely Aunt Grace, thank you." She passed the unfinished quilt around the room and Grace blushed pink under the admiring looks of the other women.

"I'm sorry it's not finished yet," Grace said, "but Ted has been working at home and"

"That's all right, Dear," Emily interrupted, and patted her friend's hand.

Only Patricia looked embarrassed.

The sticky icing one of the guests had dropped was drying on the carpet. Grace, on hands and knees, daubed at the crusty sugar with a sponge.

"Grace, here, don't do that. Let me clean it." Emily bent over and touched her friend's shoulder.

Grace continued working to soften the icing.

"Honestly, Emily, you know I don't mind doing this."

"Remember the party we had in Fort Lauderdale?" Grace asked as she leaned back on her heels. "Remember how you and Allan danced at that little restaurant on the beach?"

Emily sat back in the chair, her eyes welling with tears. "Yes, I remember," she said.

"Oh, my, Emily, I didn't mean to make you sad." Grace took Emily's hand in hers.

"It's all right, Dear. I just can't help myself."

The trip to the beach was one of many vacations that the two couples had taken together. They had travelled to Hollywood to "see the stars," to the Florida Keys on a fishing trip, to the Appalachia Mountains for the fall colors, and on countless weekend trips. They were a foursome, though Emily and Grace held them together. While the women laughed and giggled in kitchenettes and campsites preparing dinners at the end of the day, their husbands sat apart, reading or watching television or readying the car for the next day's travel. They were separate from their wives and from each other. If they enjoyed these trips, they did not say, but every year they let Emily and Grace organize a new adventure. They tagged after their wives and perhaps they brushed against the deep friendship between the women.

It was soon after the Coney Island trip that Grace had found the note on her breakfast table. Ted had written that

perhaps they brushed against the deep friendship between the women.

It was soon after the Coney Island trip that Grace had found the note on her breakfast table. Ted had written that he was leaving for another woman. That was all he said. There had been no inkling, no hint, in Grace's mind that he had been unfaithful. At first she felt sure he had been abducted and she called the police to search for him. But there existed no evidence that Ted had done anything other than pack a suitcase, write a note, and leave. As the months went by and the handmade items in her home changed from summer greens and yellows, to fall golds and browns, and finally to the festive dark greens and reds of the holidays, Grace tried to recover from the blow her husband had delivered. She had tried to accept the truth but could not. Like a fighter valiantly trying to get up before the count of ten, she floundered about, tried to get her legs under her, searched for an outstretched hand. If she had suspected his unfaithfulness she might have been able to cry and weep and been angry and then begun again. But to think that she had been as open and faithful and loyal as a puppy galled her.

She began to rebuild her life slowly. For many months she merely pretended that Ted had left on a business trip. To her friends she said nothing, and they, out of respect for her feelings and their own uneasiness, didn't mention

him to her. But at night, when half of the queen-sized bed held its nighttime cold and when the unaccustomed quiet allowed her to hear their Big Ben clock tick relentlessly, Grace's mind raced with thoughts of her husband. She imagined the other woman, holding a ridiculous image in her mind of a woman whose looks resembled Marilyn Monroe; she could watch them in her mind driving together, eating breakfast, sunning on the beach, making love.

And then Grace would relive all the intimate moments she had spent with her husband, that only couples who have spent years together can experience: the knowing glances to each other over a news report, the slight touch of hand to arm while cleaning the dishes together, the soft sigh to signal a different tempo in their love making. If Ted had died, these memories would have brought sadness to Grace, a terrible longing to have him again with her. But now, with his betrayal, the memories were an unbearable pain, and she questioned the honesty of every memory, wondered at her husband's genuineness in each moment, from his proposal of marriage to the nightly kiss he gave her. She could not sleep, and so, to rest and allow her old, tired heart to beat slower, she fashioned a new Ted. Like counting sheep, she added to his image night after night, repeating the construct in her mind until she could almost feel his warmth beside her, hear his breathing.

Gradually, the being of her imagination became a safe haven Grace could retreat to, live with. Not that she truly believed he existed, but pretending he did offered a far more comfortable life than to relive his betrayal or to feel the chill of abandonment. While she kept his presence to herself for several years, she told Emily one day when they were driving to a quilt show in a nearby town.

The day had spread out before them clear and blue, the fall leaves sparkled on the trees and roadside, and the two old friends rode together in silence punctuated occasionally with an exclamation over some new vista.

"I don't know how you do it, Grace," Emily said softly, keeping her eyes on the road ahead, both hands on the steering wheel. "How have you, well, stayed so cheerful after what Ted did?"

This was the first time the two women had talked like this, the only time Emily had broached the subject other than those early first few weeks when Grace's world swirled in turmoil.

"When my Allan died," Emily continued, "I wasn't the same for months; I don't think I'll ever be the same. Well, you know how I've changed."

"Yes, you've had to change." Grace spoke looking down at her hands. "You've become stronger, more independent, you're not so happy-go-lucky as you used to be. But you've

had to, you had teenagers and responsibilities--you had to become a new person."

Emily began to cry, the tears coming steadily down her face that otherwise showed no grief. "But at least I have the solace that my husband died," and she pulled over to a roadside rest stop, empty except for a parked moving van. She reached across her friend for the glove box and its box of tissues.

Grace squeezed Emily's arm. "I have a secret."

She said it with such liveliness, a look of impishness on her face, that Emily grinned as she wiped her tears. "What do you mean?"

Grace, with a look of sorrow, or embarrassment, said, "I pretend that Ted's still living with me." She said it quickly, in one long breath, as if, perhaps, she hoped it couldn't be heard.

Emily laughed a little. "Do you really, Dear?"

"I do," she answered, relieved at her friend's reaction.

Over the years Emily adopted Grace's delusion of Ted, shared it as if they were children with an imaginary special friend.

"There's no harm in it," Emily told herself.

"There's no other way I can live," Grace knew.

This new Ted, to be sure, proved better than the old. He spent time with her, talked with her, and didn't track in mud. She came to regard him as the child she never had, feeling protective and loving toward him. She did miss his income, having to use her savings and interest on her parents' inheritance. But overall, she was a happier woman.

In her childhood bedroom, Patricia lay on her bed, her legs propped up on a pillow. She listened with disgust to her mother and Grace talking about Ted in the next room. The women at the party had assailed her with kisses and hugs, exclaimed over her rosy cheeks, insisted that she had a healthy glow, and asked her what names she had chosen. She answered that she didn't know, but when she saw their disappointment she murmured, "Perhaps Abigail and Thomas." They had nodded quickly, saying, "Oh, yes, lovely names, I had an aunt named Abby"

Later they insisted that she lay on her back on the floor as each woman swung a gold ring tied to a thread over her belly to try to predict the baby's sex. Six of the women predicted a boy, the ring swinging back and forth; three predicted a girl, the ring swinging slowly in a circle. This embarrassed and humiliated her, and she almost told them the results of her sonogram showed it would be a boy.

After the games and puzzles taken from a Hallmark Baby Shower book had been exhausted, and the too-sweet cake had been eaten, and the favors collected, she had pretended that she loved the gifts wrapped in pink and blue.

But the worst part to her was that her pregnancy appeared to make these women, and the women in her office, feel that now she was one of them. Becoming a mother seemed to enroll her in a private club of women whose lives were as dull and washed out as the pastels of the pantsuits they wore. They lived in a world not of the present, she thought, but one based on the past, even the dreams and fantasies of the past. She did not want to think that motherhood made her one of them.

Through her open door she could still hear her mother and Grace as they spoke about Ted.

"I can't believe this is going on," Pat thought, and she called to her mother.

"Are you feeling all right, Dear?" Emily asked her daughter as she entered the bedroom.

"How can you do that?" Pat whispered as she struggled to sit up.

"What do you mean?"

"This charade with Grace. When did Ted leave? Eight years ago? And Grace has deluded herself all these years-- and with your help!"

Emily shut the door. "I think you're overreacting to this, Grace just"

"Overreacting! Eight years ago her husband left her for another woman--it doesn't matter! No one cares about that anymore. It happens to lots of people. But instead of facing the facts, she has fooled herself into believing that he's still with her. She's wasted eight years living with a ghost."

"Oh, I think she's been happy, she keeps busy with her"

"Don't you see, that's not my point. She's living a lie. She's got to face reality, Mother."

"I think you must be tired from the party, Pat. Why don't you take a nap."

Patricia stiffened. "I'm not a child, Mother"

The door opened and Grace's small face peeked in. The mothball odor followed her. "Can you take me home now, Emily? I told Ted I'd be back around six."

Patricia pushed herself off the bed and said, "Ted is gone. He left you a long time ago. He's not coming back." With the last words, Pat sat down on the bed heavily, grabbed at her purse and fumbled for a cigarette. Grace's face disappeared from the opened door.

Emily looked at her daughter with dismay. "Oh, Patricia." She hurried out of the room and found Grace in

the dining room on her knees, working to remove the icing still in the carpet.

Emily knelt beside her. "I've almost got it," Grace said as she scrubbed at the spot.

"I'll take you home whenever you're ready to go," Emily said.

"I'm ready now," and she pulled herself up with the help of the dining room table leg. Her face was flushed and blotchy. "I mustn't forget this." She picked up the unfinished quilt.

The two old friends drove to the apartment building in silence. It was almost dark and the streetlamps glowed weakly at the end of a dreary spring day.

"Patricia doesn't understand us, Grace, she never will. Don't be angry with her."

Grace paused, her hand ready to open the car door. "Maybe I have been foolish, letting my charade go on so long." She paused, then whispered, "It's just so much easier."

Emily patted her friend's knee, smiled and said, "Say hello to Ted for me."

Grace looked startled, opened the car door, and then disappeared down the walk, the quilt under her arm.

Inside her apartment, Grace worked to finish the quilt. The final rows were difficult and she had trouble getting

the corners to match. Her concentration slipped and she would find herself staring out her picture window. She put the quilt aside, a bundle of pastel-colored cloth heaped on a folding chair. Something was very wrong, she knew, and she couldn't complete her project.

Outside, spring had finally arrived. The daffodils, yellow and white, kept their faces to the sun as it made its low arc across the pale blue of the sky. The maples finally unleashed their leaves, a new green against the stark branches. And the crocuses, bright and showy in their yellows, purples, and whites, gave off a faint sweet odor that attracted the hungry spring bees.

Grace watched spring struggle against the last remnants of snow and slowly she began to create a new quilt for Pat's child. The colors were wrong before, she thought, and she purchased a yard each of deep red, black, and cobalt blue at a fabric store. The new design was simple, only twenty-one pieces. She had the top of the quilt finished in a day and then she began to quilt: bringing the top, the batting and the bottom layers of the quilt together with tiny running stitches. This was her favorite part in creating a quilt because the stitches that bound the layers together could be made in any pattern or picture.

Patricia's baby was born two weeks later. "Let me know when you want to see Thomas," Emily bubbled to Grace over the phone. "He's so beautiful."

Grace stood admiring the finished quilt. It had taken her only three weeks from start to finish. She had worked frantically, quilting for hours at a time. The tips of her fingers bore callouses from the pricking of the quilting needle. The quilt was crib size but Grace hoped it would be used as a wall hanging. She made the red, black and cobalt blue material into an Amish design of simplicity called "Diamond in a Square." She knew that its geometrical shape would attract Patricia's mathematical mind. The Amish had designed it to be plain so as not to offend God, and Grace used its geometry to lure Patricia. Because, stark as the pattern of the quilt was, hidden in the quilting stitches that bound the layers together, Grace created worlds as rich and full as her imagination would allow. Unicorns, dragons, castles, kings and queens, and brave princes and princesses lived in the black sections of the quilt. Spaceships and astronauts, Martians and comets dwelled in the blue. And in the red, she quilted the flowers of spring: hyacinths, crocuses, anemones, daffodils, tulips, and jonquils, all bursting forth in a springtime orgy. To a glance, the quilting lines were merely a melee of wild patterns and lines, but Grace knew that there would come a time, when

Thomas reached age five or six or seven, when he would discover these hidden worlds.

Before she wrapped the quilt she held it up to the empty chair. "This is the quilt that Thomas needs," she said.

New-Age Golem

New-Age Golem

Caroline Louise and I stood outside the door of apartment six, my finger poised dramatically above the doorbell. I couldn't help playing up this moment. "Are you ready, CL?" She nodded quickly. Her upper teeth, recently freed from silver bands of braces, bit her lower lip in perfect alignment. "OK, here we go," I whispered, and I twirled my pointer finger in the air before pressing the black button. The broken mechanism made a muffled clunk. Without looking at Caroline Louise I rapped my knuckles hard on the door, three times.

We heard an inner door open and shut, footsteps approaching, locks unbolted, and then the door swung inward to reveal Mike, still dressed in the business suit and tie he'd worn to work, but now a black skullcap sat atop his head. He looked flustered, red, and out of breath. "Welcome," he said. "You must be Caroline Louise, your aunt

has told me a lot about you." Caroline Louise mumbled a greeting, shook hands with Mike.

He motioned us to head down the dark hall and as I pushed Caroline Louise ahead of me, I whispered sarcastically to Mike, "Nice hat," and giggled. He blushed, which surprised me from a guy that could dish it out faster than you could hand it to him in the office.

We entered the dimly lit dining room, the shadows of bulky furniture climbing up the walls, a musty, old apartment smell pervading. In the center of the room, around a candle-lit table, sat members of Mike's family: his father and mother, David and Rachel Shapiro; one set of grandparents, Shlomo and Golda; and a younger sister about Caroline Louise's age named Robin. Mike's introductions were formal and deliberate, and, though I found his ceremonious behavior out of character, I took his cue and mimicked his formality. Caroline Louise needed no prompting to be reserved, she took each Shapiro hand delicately, as if she'd been handed a crystal chalice.

The long introductions over, grandfather Shlomo intoned from the head of the table, "I understand you work with my grandson, Miss Harkin." The sound of his voice acted like a catalyst for the rest of the family, as Rachel, Golda, and Robin scurried off to the kitchen, David reached for his wine, and Mike indicated chairs for us at the table.

"Yes, Mike and I started in the law firm at the same time, three of us were hired right out of Northwestern. I've known Mike since torts class in 1983." I continued on, perhaps prattling a bit in my nervousness, but the old man listened dutifully, his skullcap riding the top of his wispy hair like a flying saucer hovering above a gray cloud. His feigned look of interest occasionally dropped as I talked, bushy brows coming together in irritation. I cut my story short. "So, now we've been with the firm two years," and I reached gratefully for the proffered wine from Mike's father.

"Miss Harkin," Shlomo began, and I corrected him, "Sue, please." He ignored my attempt at casualness. "Meyer," and he pronounced the word with great concentration and deliberateness, so that even through his thick gray beard I could see the red of his lips meeting on the "m" sound and his large, ivory-colored teeth parting on the "er" sound, "Has told us much about you." He nodded his shaggy head toward Caroline Louise, "And about your niece." CL looked down at her lap.

Thankfully, the women reappeared from the kitchen, carrying trays of food, and Mike, or Meyer, and the other men made pleased sounds and said words, Yiddish I think, in obvious approval. "This is the challah," grandfather Shlomo explained as Golda placed a braided loaf of bread on the table.

"How nice," I said. "It really looks good, doesn't it CL?"

Grandfather Shlomo stared at Caroline Louise. "The Challah is a little like your bread in the Eucharist of your Christian church. We will all share it after I bless the Sabbath with a Kiddush, a prayer."

Something about the old man's directness touched Caroline Louise, because the kid, unfortunately, found her voice: "But communion is with Jesus," she said timidly.

I got a rush of blood from my feet to my head and back down again. I started to apologize but Shlomo interrupted me. "Yes, this sharing of the challah is for Jews a celebration of the Sabbath, a kind of communion with God, the same God you worship at your church." The rest of Mike's family had either smiled at CL's comment or looked to Shlomo to answer her. Even Mike appeared interested in his grandfather's response.

The prayer began, Shlomo's voice rising and falling in melodious tones. Caroline Louise stared at him, her shyness gave way to curiosity, and then she folded her hands and bowed her head. I watched the faces of Mike's family, some with lips moving to the words of the prayer, others with eyes tightly shut, hands clasped with fervor. Even Mike, who I hoped would give me a little wink, rocked his upper body back and forth with the prayer. I noticed that his skullcap covered the balding spot he'd developed on the

crown of his head in the last two years. I giggled inwardly and smiled outwardly; maybe this is why he wore the thing I thought, pure vanity.

I began to wonder if I'd made the right decision. As I sat in that dark room, candles flickering, prayers offered in a hypnotizing swirl of voices, surrounded by people apparently in the midst of some religious rapture, I knew I had not bargained for this. I had made the arrangement with Mike to show my niece how little we differed from Jews. It had been a plan long in the making.

My niece, at 14, had inherited all the biases and prejudices of my older brother and his wife. I saw it coming, I had bitten my tongue so many times when she was younger that I had a permanent dent in the tip. Warned by my mother not to interfere, told by my father to mind my own business, called by my sister-in-law "naive," and labeled by my brother a "knee-jerk-liberal," I decided to let their child rearing run its course, knowing my influence would be felt someday.

They started on her at birth, refusing to let a black nurse assist in her delivery. As she grew up. Caroline Louise Played only with white dolls, other white Christian children, and attended private schools where white, blue-eyed boys and girls, who dressed well, were taught by teachers who looked like grown-up versions of their pupils.

She laughed at racist, sexist, and anti-semitic jokes told by her parents and their friends. She heard her mother say under her breath, "Look how slow these people are," when a black check-out woman kept her waiting. She watched her father clutching the arms of his chair as protestors paraded on the evening news. Whether they marched for gay, civil, or women's rights, the television was snapped off amid a flurry of his obscenities.

Not that all of Caroline Louise's redneck training was so blatant. My brother and his wife hired a black maid who came in once a week to clean, and black gardeners who mowed the lawn, edged, and pruned every two weeks. They were cordial, even friendly to these people. But while CL was instructed to call all grownups Mr. or Mrs. so-and-so, she called the hired black help by their first names. When using a public restroom, CL's mother instructed her to place toilet paper on the seat before sitting on it; when she grew older she was taught to squat over the toilet, never touching the seat because, "You never know who's been there before you."

Though I was only 11 when CL was born, I realized early that my bigoted brother and sister-in-law planned to raise a miniature version of themselves. For many years my brother and I had been at odds and I think I'm as liberal as I am because I have his example not to follow. He is 14 years older than me and it's hard to believe we were raised by the

same parents as different as we are. Of course, at 11, he treated me condescendingly, like a kid sister, and I treated him more like a long distance cousin, as seldom as I saw him. When I did see him, I could barely stand his company in the same room.

When Caroline Louise came along (her mother insisted she be called by the whole name, never just Caroline or Carol) I saw an opportunity to have the sister I'd never had and I wanted to take her under my wing so she wouldn't grow up like her parents. At first, Caroline Louise, or CL as I called her when we were alone (I told her it was our secret), and I were like sisters. I did a lot of babysitting for her and we got along great. But when I left Florida to go to school in Illinois, when my visits with her became only an annual two-week event at most, then I noticed how we were growing apart.

I remember my first visit home. Caroline Louise, her long blond hair permed into a Little Orphan Annie curl since I'd seen her eight months before, said, "Daddy says you've been seeing an Indian. He says you're learning how to keep the Indians, Negroes, and Chinks on welfare." Mind you, this is from a seven-year-old. Actually, as I explained to her, I had gone on a date with a Native American. I made a mistake by mentioning it to my brother in a letter. And the welfare stuff he picked up, because, at the time, I majored in social work. Explaining this to CL was easy, trying not

to make my brother out to be a liar took tact. I told her her daddy sometimes exaggerated and commended her on using the word "Negro," but that "Black" would be even better and "Chinese" could substitute for "Chink."

I began sending gifts to enlighten her, expand her horizons: a black Cabbage Patch doll one year, a male and female doll with anatomically correct sex organs (including miniature feminine hygiene paraphernalia for the female) the next. I sent books with characters of different nationalities as the heroes, or girls as the doctors, boys as the nurses. I bought African fables, Chinese folktales, new versions of Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty where the woman saves the prince or fights the evil witch herself. One Christmas I mailed her a dreidel, a Jewish child's spinning top. I bought her a Japanese kimono, Chinese silk slippers, an embroidered shirt from the Ukraine. My liberalizing gifts did not work, however. Her parents began screening all her packages before she opened them. I know because though I'd receive a thank you note (I think my sister-in-law wrote it with her left hand to make the writing appear childish), CL never responded appropriately when I mentioned the gifts to her. I'd say, "Do you play a lot with the Russian cosmonaut doll?" or "Did you like the Japanese candy covered in rice paper?" She'd always answer, "Yes, I like it a lot." Never anything more. Her parents had brainwashed her.

When I visited her in Florida I made a point of having CL experience other cultures. I would take her out to lunch as a special treat with her aunt. She thought we were getting a burger at McDonald's but I'd take her to a Cuban cafe for black beans and rice, let her taste my demitasse. The next time we ate bagels and cheesecake at Wolfies. She refused to go out with me after that, insisting on McDonald's only. I could see that her parents' hold on her had grown tight. I knew that I had to get her away from their influence for a longer period of time when, during my last visit home, I offered to drive her to her ballet lesson. At a stoplight on busy 441, a cluster of protesters stood in front of a booth handing out literature and holding signs that read: "Free Soviet Jewry." Caroline Louise, reading the sign, nonchalantly asked, "I wonder if they have any gold necklaces?" That night I persuaded her parents to let CL come and visit me for a month in the summer, under the ruse of wanting to get to know her better. They agreed, after much discussion with each other. I felt like a child molester on trial.

Plates of food kept appearing from the Shapiro kitchen as Golda and Robin served us. CL offered to help and I felt pride at my niece's manners. Rachel and I made small talk, but I found we had little in common. She was one of those society women, very involved in high mucklimuck kinds of

things, especially since her husband, David, was a doctor. After the ceremonial bread, we ate a clear soup with matzo balls, followed by chicken, green beans and a tossed salad. It wasn't much different from the food I'd grown up with and I know CL felt relief.

Before we left my apartment she wanted to know what we'd be eating. "I'm not sure," I answered, "but you've got to learn to try everything."

"But what if they serve fish," she said. Fish was one of about 50 types of food she refused to eat. Well, she lucked out on the fish, but when I looked over at her finished soup, four matzo balls huddled at the bottom of the bowl. I squeezed her thigh under the table. She knew I wanted her to eat them but she shook her head.

When Golda got up to clear the soup dishes she saw the matzo balls. "You know," she said, "Meyer never liked those either when he was younger."

"I think it's an acquired taste," Mike said to CL. She smiled at him and I relaxed a little.

When Shlomo began to explain Jewish dietary laws to CL, I repeated a joke Mike told me last year: "Meyer told me that traditional Jews can't eat anything with a face." Everybody pretended they hadn't heard me and I realized that I might have overstepped my bounds. I think Mike wanted to kick me but couldn't reach me from where he sat.

Shlomo began enlivening the evening meal with Sabbath songs, "Zemirot," he explained to Caroline Louise, and I began to think that my plan had backfired. The dining room transformed into a scene like "Fiddler on the Roof," with Mike's family clapping and singing in Yiddish. I clearly expected Shlomo to jump onto the table and start dancing around like Teviah, kicking the dishes out from under him as he hopped about, Cossack style. It appeared that rather than breaking the myths for CL, the Shapiros reinforced the stereotype. What absolutely killed me is that Mike joined in on the singing, clapping, and even prayed with as much fervor as the rest of them.

This was definitely not the Mike I knew from law school or work. Physically, he looked like Richard Benjamin, tall, lean, with black hair, beautiful dark eyes with long, sexy lashes. Mentally he reminded me of Portnoy, his off-color humor filled with sarcasm, his off-hand remarks caustic. There was a time when I thought Mike and I would be an item, maybe a permanent thing. We've spent so much time together that when we walk down the street we need only raise an eyebrow to each other and we laugh aloud, knowing that we both noticed the pimple on someone's neck, the hick clothing of a tourist, the uncovered crack of a fat man's ass as he bent over. For awhile I was sure we'd at least make it to bed. I even started wondering if he'd be uncircumcised. I just hate those. I started dropping hints to see if I could

find out, so I could brace myself not to overreact when he dropped his pants the first time. I found out the truth when I initiated a conversation on the trend to stop circumcising baby boys in this country. I read that a lot of men viewed the circumcision as an unnecessary mutilation and a loss of sexual stimulation. Mike laughed, said he'd never thought about his dick that way, and that as a Jew he didn't have much choice. It was the first time religion had come up and all we talked about really was the Jewish custom of circumcision. I told him that maybe I should become a Jew since I believed in the circumcised dick. When I said that he laughed, and he really did tell me the joke about Jewish food being faceless, so when he appeared all holy and religious at the Shapiro's Sabbath dinner, I was pretty shocked.

The Grand Pubba, as I had silently christened grandfather Shlomo, was again leading his table of worshippers in prayer, a grace after the meal. And I thought the Christians were religious, at least we said grace once before eating and that was it. Caroline Louise needed no prompting to pray this time. As soon as Shlomo went into his rapture, his fleecy head looking up to the ceiling as he inhaled, then slowly lowering to his circumcised lap on the exhale, Caroline Louise's blonde head dropped like a disciple's. Jesus, I thought, what if she

returns to her Baptist parents and tells them she wants to be a Jew? I knew she'd been going to church regularly, was even in some teen church group that sold candy and had secret meetings I was sure were controlled by the John Birch society. But in this circle of dark heads, some covered with skullcaps, or excuse me, yarmulkes, as the Grand Pubba instructed us, her little blonde head, bowed reverently, belonged far more than mine, held upright, a sly grin on my face. Mike never looked up.

Following this visit with the Shapiros, I planned at least six other excursions for Caroline Louise during her stay. We would be attending a Chinese community potluck, a Native American pow-wow, my black friend Steve would come for dinner one night, a woman doctor friend the next, she'd meet gay women at a rugby match, and I'd complete her education with a luncheon with Bob, a friend of mine who happens to be gay. I ranked these lessons by shock value, starting with the least intrusive on her consciousness to the most, hoping that I could build her tolerance and knowledge gradually. I chose Mike's Jewish family because it seemed they'd be the most like us, or at least I thought they would be, since I knew Mike so well. I didn't want CL to have to deal with different colored skin right off the bat, or big differences in philosophy, like sexual preference.

I found out about Mike's family because he was never free to go to dinner or a show on Friday nights. When I asked him why, he said he always celebrated the Sabbath with his family. "Boy, that must be a delight," I said. I could remember Sunday dinners at my house, my grandmother peeing all over herself as she tried to make it to the bathroom, my grandfather "in the cups" as they so quaintly put it, my mother giving my father the silent treatment over some minor irritation, and me, bored as hell, especially when we went for the ubiquitous "drive" after dinner. "God, it was dull," I told Mike.

"Yeah, but I thought your whole family went to church together," he said.

Why Mike had dredged up this information I don't know. I had mentioned it one time when we were waiting to have Sunday brunch at a restaurant and the place was crowded with overdressed, overperfumed Christians. I told him that the whole scene brought back bad memories. "Oh, yes, it was just a terrific little homey scene," I said. "Mom with her collection of Sunday hats, Pop grumbling the whole time, my brother off somewhere, and me, trussed up in the most uncomfortable get-ups you've ever seen. And dull, God, if I thought the family gatherings were dull, church was even worse. When I was 15 I started teaching Sunday school because it meant I didn't have to be in church for so long. I'd sit in the front pew with my tribe of kindergarten kids

and we'd march out in single file after about 10 minutes of the service, the rest of the congregation singing the hymn of the week and getting all teary-eyed as they watched their little charges troop out. I'd get them in our room of the educational building and color with them, or cut out pictures of Jesus to paste on the bulletin board, or practice the Christmas pageant with them, trying to keep their gold-glittered halos from falling off their heads. But it was all better than sitting through the prayers, sermons, and kneeling and standing like jumping jacks.

"Listen," and now I was getting pretty worked up, "when the Protestant church wanted to open up a little more to its members, they added some ask-response stuff. That means, the priest says something like, 'Let us give thanks unto the Lord' and we, the congregation, reading it out of the prayer books, answer in unison, 'It is very meet, right, and our bounden duty' After awhile, the whole thing is just as deadly as listening inertly to the priest droning on. What really got me is that a lot of Protestants left the church because this and some other changes were too liberal. Can you believe that?"

By now there was no stopping me, Mike and I had never really gotten into any kind of religious discussion before, and my voice had been steadily increasing in volume. We were crammed into the foyer of the restaurant surrounded by

the church-goers. Mike made a motion with his head, like maybe I should keep it down.

There was a big Jerry Falwell type that had placed his obese three-piece suited body between us and his family, as if protecting them from the miscreants. "Screw them," I whispered to Mike, "let them eat their opium of the masses," and we left.

As I watched him now with his family, chuckling at his father's joking with his father, Shlomo, or complimenting his grandmother on the dessert of sponge cake, I remembered that Mike never complained about these Friday get-togethers. There were no more eruptions of singing and dancing, Rachel and Golda cleared the table, David read the newspaper, and Shlomo and the girls sat at the table. Mike and I offered to help with the dishes but the women refused, sending us away. We stood alone in the hallway.

I leaned against the wall, crossed my arms in front of me, and smiled at him sweetly, "So, Meyer, what's the deal, are you some kind of closet Jew?" He'd been avoiding me all evening; not looking at me, not wanting to talk with me. And now that I could finally talk with him he looked like he wanted to run away.

"I told you this would be a bad idea," he said.

"I don't know why you say that, my niece is ready to pull a Sammy Davis Jr. conversion, your grandfather thinks

I'm some kind of, golem, didn't he call it, an artificial human, and I find out that my best friend has a secret life with the Star of David."

I heard Shlomo and Robin teaching Caroline Louise some Yiddish words. I could just make out their faces in the flickering candlelight. CL and Robin kept giggling as Shlomo enunciated each syllable dramatically.

I turned to Mike, "Do you really believe all this stuff?" and I motioned to the dining room where the accoutrements of the Sabbath--the candles, the leftover challah, and, most importantly, Shlomo's broad back as he sat facing Robin and Caroline Louise--were still visible.

"Sometimes," he answered. "Sometimes a lot."

Shlomo and the girls had started reciting a prayer, CL trying to learn the words as they went.

"Does this," and I gently touched Mike's head where the yarmulke clung precariously to his thinning hair, "have anything to do with us not being closer?"

He nodded, and I thought he might start rocking again as he did during the Kiddush. From the kitchen, I could hear David with his wife and mother, laughing and speaking in Yiddish; in the dining room, Shlomo still cast his spell on his granddaughter and Caroline Louise as the three of them prayed in unison; and in the hallway, Mike and I stood silently, very much apart.